

On Translation in a Global Market

Emily Apter

“Translation in a Global Market” focuses on the extent to which global artists, video makers, and writers consciously or unconsciously build translatability into their art forms. This special issue of *Public Culture* finds inspiration in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s midcentury critique of the American “culture industry” in the famous chapter, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹ But whereas Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Frankfurt School more generally focused their critique on how emergent capital logics were encoded in mass cultural forms, they paid little attention to questions of translatability across the complex cultural and social terrains of capital. The question of how one achieves a mass cultural object—a cultural object that can be translated across linguistic, cultural, and social contexts—still begs to be answered. This special issue explores a number of interrelated problems that arise from the question of a global market in cultural and aesthetic forms. These problems include the marketing of national literature, the politics of publishing (with emphasis on the postcolonial dominance of Anglophone or standard-language publishing houses), and the question of an emergent internationalized aesthetics. When the problem of a globalizing mass culture and public culture is approached from the perspective of translatability, new and important

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 120–67. Originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969).

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questions of cultural commodification and, thus, ideology arise. How do some works gain international visibility, while others do not?

These questions take on curricular and pedagogical urgency in the current rush to globalize the canon. The constraints imposed by what is available in translation in part determine the content of the transnational canon, which contributes another layer of complexity to the value-laden selection process of authors and serves as partial explanation for why “global lit” courses tend to feature similar rosters of non-Western authors (such as Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Tayeb Salih, Gabriel García Márquez, Nadine Gordimer, Naguib Mahfouz, Assia Djebar, Ben Okri, Arundhati Roy). The most obvious explanation—that these and other writers among the “happy few” are selected because they are universally acclaimed, excellent writers—obviously fails to fully account for their predominance. The difficulty of book distribution in many economically beleaguered countries remains an insuperable impediment to transnational exchange (a point made recently by the distinguished author Mongo Beti when he spoke of the dire situation in Cameroon).² There are specialized niche markets within the “global” that contribute to fads and fashions (to wit, the current popularity of Indian English-language novelists and Irish playwrights), sorting writers into subcategories such as “international” (Milan Kundera, Julio Cortázar, Samuel Beckett, Ferdinand Pessoa, Octavio Paz, Orhan Pamuk, Danilo Kiš); “postcolonial” (Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Anita Desai, Patrick Chamoiseau, Mariama Bâ); and “multiculti,” “native,” or “minority” (Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Sherman Alexie, Jessica Hagedorn, Gloria Anzaldúa, Haruki Murakami, Amitav Ghosh, Colm Tóibín). These labels, though they can help launch or spotlight world-class writers—pulling them out of ethnic area studies ghettos on the bookstore shelves—also cling like barnacles to their reception and afford constrictive stereotypes of identity. The Australian case is interesting in this regard: a strong, institutionally well-connected, London-based Australian poet like John Kinsella routinely fails to warrant inclusion in the global canon even though his poetry uses his native landscape to brilliant effect as the stage for futurist visitations by robots and psychics. Naturalized in the British and American literary market, his writing is not exotic enough, while a poet like Lionel Fogarty—whose dense, compelling verse incorporates Aboriginal language—fails to cross over because his writing remains too exotic for mainstream taste.

2. Mongo Beti, in a discussion session during a conference on “The Chosen Tongue” organized by Maryse Condé and Pierre Force at Columbia University’s Maison Française, 7–8 April 2000.

The increased motility of global culture—fostered by an art market system of international galleries, museum shows, and biennials that highlight select star artists from all over the world—foretells a time when these labels will become obsolete. Even very locally grounded works, such as the Republican murals of Northern Ireland discussed by Lyell Davies in this issue, are acknowledged to be readily consumable by international media, circulated for both their photogenicity and their appeal to other territories engaged in power contestations. And, as Elena Climent's *Objects with Photo of Spanish Porch* gestures, the intimate spaces of a writing room open out into an imagined field. The work of translation is here the transduction of place across modes and forms of "writing": field notes, oil image, the photogenic quality of the memorial. Web diffusion also contributes to a deregionalization that renders labeling and bracketing within a global frame incoherent. As Renée Green and Michael Eng discuss in this issue, we can already observe a situation in which location has become somewhat meaningless as the work of artists, writers, and thinkers is dispatched simultaneously and instantly to electronic sites, or as artists themselves become conscious of living transiently in one city while exhibiting in others. Producing work directly in a nonnative tongue (as in the case of the Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat, who lives in New York and writes in English), many artists seem to bypass the act of translation, subsuming it as a problematic within a larger project of cultural or self-representation. In this picture, "global" signifies not so much the conglomeration of world cultures arrayed side by side in their difference but, rather, a problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda that elicits transnational engagement.

This drive toward a transnationally translatable monoculture is supported by the fact that linguistic superpowers—with English the clear victor—increasingly call the shots and turn once formidable competitors (European languages, say) into gladiators fighting among themselves for international market share. In French bookstores in 2000, for example, translations into French or even *untranslated* books in English seemed to be acquiring more and more shelf space. This suggests that France, despite the polemics of its academies, is losing the battle against the encroachment of English. But on a more optimistic note, it indicates a welcome return to cosmopolitan attitudes within French culture, abetted by post-Wall, pro-Europe sentiments and a greater responsiveness to the claims to hospitality, residency, and citizenship by nonnationals in the wake of tragic wars in Africa and the Balkans. Most cynically perhaps, it implies that France no longer maintains its special hold on the market in "hot" fiction, philosophy, and theory—a novelty deficit that must be made up domestically (at least in part) by translations. Contemporary American fiction certainly holds sway; the French

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edition of the latest Russell Banks book can be found in the *vitrine* of virtually every bookstore, and it bests British bestsellers (though a valiant effort to translate the Edinburgh street slang of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* into French attests to a French interest in Britpack fiction).³ More works of fiction and criticism translated from Arabic are also in evidence, which is attributable, perhaps, to France's gradual wake up to the importance of a Maghrebin cultural presence within its borders and to the prescient, if modest, efforts of small *maisons d'édition* such as Actes Sud to redress habits of Francocentric insularity and Arabophobia within the publishing industry.

The intersection of the regionalist politics of publishing with the old "who gets in and who gets excluded" problem of canonicity inspires a heightened critical awareness of market influence. And yet books—even in their electronic form, I would wager—still tend to be treated as freestanding objects and are assigned objective legitimacy and presence. Who wants to take stock of the publicity engines pumping behind them or the processes of editorial networking and triage? Though these invisible layers of intervention are obviously crucial to a text's access to translatability, the theme of translatability has habitually been treated in more theoretical terms with reference to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Task of the Translator" and to the important readings of Benjamin's essay by George Steiner, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and many others.⁴

In terms of approach, the essays in this issue are genuinely eclectic, dealing with translation neither from a strict quantitative perspective (with hard data culled from the sociology of literature or the history of the book) nor from a purely hermeneutical point of view (regarding translation as a condition of all forms of semiosis, linguistic transfer, and interpretation, or, following Benjamin, as the redemptive fulfillment of a text's afterlife). The contributions here tend to be attuned to the market conditions that affect a translation's reception and circulation, but their real emphasis—if a singular one can be adduced—is on the politics of language.

Rainer Ganahl, for example, is interested in the cultural capital of languages in a global market. Many of his videos and critical writings emphasize how foreign language acquisition has historically functioned within the power politics of global communication and capital flow. In the video *Basic Feelings* (which takes

3. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Minerva, 1994); Welsh, *Trainspotting*, trans. Eric Lindor Fall (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 1996).

4. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969). See also George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

the utter banality of the language lab exercise as its point of departure), the speaker's flat, synthetic repetition of the phrase "I feel strange today" in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Korean causes language to become uncannily denaturalized and "unhomed." The speaker's loss of affect, even as he cites the vocabulary of affect, serves to negate "basic feelings," and this negation is then reproduced in the spacings and gaps between the verbal repetitions. Each phrase signifies the same thing, but the incommensurability of meaning becomes increasingly obvious with each enunciation in a "foreign" language. Each language is apparently assigned equal weight, but the differential power relations of Western and non-Western languages in the marketplace of language learning become more and more apparent. Linguistic nonidentity is brought to the fore, with ambiguous implications. Is globalization in language studies a gateway to enlightened cosmopolitanism? Or is it simply a system of treaties or *vases communicants* that permit limited semantic transfers between nations? The auditory effect of multilingual utterance has an uncanny, double-edged quality as well: on the one hand, it suggests a corporate, global United Nations–speak, in which every message is beamed in simultaneous translation around the world, devoid of context and deceptively "value free"; and yet, on the other hand, this auditory effect reveals how politically *unneutral* the rules of grammar and translation are, depending on how and where they are used.

In bringing fundamental issues in social theory into closer contact with aesthetic objects, many of the essays in this volume define a distinct axis along which literary transnationalism can be defined. A translational transnationalism, if you will, offers a comprehensive sense of the politics of literacy, literariness, and reading publics. The field of translation studies is sufficiently capacious to cover, on the one hand, pragmatic, "real world" issues—bilingualism in public schools, the embattlement of minority languages within official state cultures, controversies over black English—and, on the other, more conceptually abstract considerations such as the literary appropriation of pidgins and Creoles, multilingual experimentalism among historic avant-gardes, or translation across media. Actually, what proves to be especially interesting is the mixing up of these areas of inquiry: the joins between orality and literacy, literacy and literateness. Here we may be informed by Gayatri Spivak's work on forms of orality (particularly in subaltern, gendered contexts) that are distinct from oral or mnemonic cultural expression (a violent orality referred to by Spivak as "enforced illiteracy").⁵ Also

5. These terms were used in a talk entitled "Challenges for the Organic Intellectual" delivered by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak at the Center of the Study of Women, University of California at Los Angeles, 26 April 2000.

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instructive is her notion of “transnational literacy,” which she developed in another context and refers to in her essay in this issue. Spivak uses this term in relation to “the effortful location” of “new immigrant American college and university teachers of English” in the American university system, and *not* to “subaltern projects of literacy, or the pedagogy of the oppressed.”⁶ Transnational literacy, at least in this particular ascription, designates minimum levels of fluency in transnational politics, a crucial dimension in the formation of the modern educator. But it could easily be extended to the endeavor of rethinking comparative literary study in such a way as to nudge it closer to problems of world literacy and the politics of linguistic border wars. On the face of it, transnational literacy provides a conceptual counterweight to cosmopolitan literariness, in which metropolitan movements and genres tend to be privileged. The *transnational* part of the equation places greater emphasis on the transference of cultural capital from non-Western to non-Western nation, whereas the term *global* tends to assume a metropolitan circuitry of cultural distribution.

Within these expanded parameters, translational transnationalism accords greater attention to the linguistic predicaments of minorities and microminorities — what Lawrence Venuti has referred to as “the ethics of location” in translation studies; what Colin MacCabe characterizes as “the eloquence of the vulgar”; or the difficulties of defining the threshold of a discrete language, when dialect, vernacular, Creole, slang, and accent shear off from standard language.⁷

These concerns are of particular significance in places with a history of colonial or neocolonial rule in which standard languages have been imposed and native tongues are overmanaged, banned, or reduced to the status of endangered species. Michael North’s analysis in this issue of the “rotten English” deployed by Ken Saro-Wiwa addresses the violent stigmas and stakes carried by “other Englishes.” Maryse Condé discusses here how, as an Afro-Caribbean writer who

6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Teaching for the Times,” in *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge, and Power*, ed. Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh (London: Zed Books, 1995), 176.

7. See Lawrence Venuti’s important chapter on “Globalization” in *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998). Venuti has been a pioneer in opening up the field of translation studies to questions of cultural identity, the marketing of bestsellers, the status of minority languages, and the impact of globalization. Colin MacCabe assigns signal importance to the study of multiple Englishes in an approach to literary studies that blurs the boundaries among regimes of literacy and translation studies. In particular, see his review of a program introduced at Strathclyde in the 1980s that included courses devoted to the study of the history of English, Broken English, and varieties of contemporary English. MacCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language, Cinema, and the Politics of Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 9–11.

chooses to write in French, she can create another kind of French language without necessarily relying on the introduction of Creole idiom and vocabulary. Skirting orthodoxies of postcolonial interpretation, while refusing to minimize the linguistic damage of colonial legacies, these contributions caution against simplistic models of translational transnationalism that idealize the minority language as an object of ecological preservationism.

That said, there are crucial questions around the precarious future of minoritarian languages in a global market that favors linguistic superpowers. My own essay, along with that of Timothy Brennan, considers the enhanced role of world English as the Esperanto of cultural and technological literacy. Brennan shows how the hegemony of English—strengthened by the embrace of market triumphalism by postcolonial and post-Cold War economies alike—has contributed to a kind of translation loss. A “politico-exotic” aesthetic taste has emerged, rapidly domesticating dissident writing and delocalizing non-Western literatures within a global pluralist continuum. Brennan’s intimation that the dark side of cultural cosmopolitanism is a generic, depoliticized translationese underscores the importance of working on translation in conjunction with the global onslaught of English as a universal language, a Tower of Babel resurrected after its initial fall and relentlessly dedicated to one language *über alles*.⁸

Of course, in the history of aesthetics, the Tower of Babel has not always signified so negatively. For G. W. F. Hegel, following Goethe, it represented a rare moment of human community:

“What is the sacred?” asked Goethe. He answers soon enough: “It is that which unifies souls.” One could say, on the basis of this definition, that the sacred, as objective and substance of this union, constitutes the first content of independent architecture. We have the most familiar example in the Tower of Babel legend. In the far off valleys of the Euphrates, man erects an immense work of architecture; all the men work there collectively, and it is this community that constitutes at one and the same time the aim and content of the work. . . . All the peoples of the world work on

8. Babel, after the tower’s fall, is the enemy of states. According to the Jesuit linguist Louis-Jean Calvet, *babel* is the biblical name for linguistic disorderly conduct or language war. In coining the neologism *babelization* to refer to the multiplication of languages on a particular territory—thus the linguistic equivalent of the political term *balkanization*—Calvet historically reconstructs the logic of imperial monolingual states bent on seeing languages properly circumscribed within political and linguistic frontiers. The trouble of course, as Calvet points out, is “that this scenario is very rare, not to say, non-existent, and so we end up back at Babel.” Calvet, *Language Wars and Linguistic Politics*, trans. Michel Petheram (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

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it, coming together to realize this incommensurable work, remaking the ground, stacking blocks of stone, subjecting the entire country to an architectural transformation.⁹

As the exteriorized, material form of confraternity, as an aesthetic construct subordinating cultural particularisms to a common ideal, Hegel's tower thus continues the tradition of Enlightenment and revolutionary utopianism that was to be so important for the modernist avant-garde, as for example in the celebrated project by Vladimir Tatlin for a leaning, transparent tower symbolizing the Third International. But more important for my purposes, Hegel's vision of the tower foretells the pairing of communication and industry in contemporary translation technologies. For advances in machine translation are inevitably reconstructing the biblical Tower of Babel trope. As early as 1949, Warren Weaver (the future author of *Alice in Many Tongues*¹⁰ who is often touted as the father of machine translation) drafted a memorandum that laid out a visionary program for technologically programmed speech-to-speech translation. (The memorandum implicitly invites comparison between the race to crack the universal language code and the race to decode the human genome.) Weaver wrote:

Think, by analogy, of individuals living in a series of tall closed towers, all erected over a common foundation. When they try to communicate with one another they shout back and forth, each from his own closed tower. . . . But when an individual goes down his tower, he finds himself in a great open basement, common to all the towers. Here he establishes easy and useful communication with the persons who have also descended from their towers. Thus it may be true that the way to translate from Chinese to Arabic, or from Russian to Portuguese, is not to attempt the direct route, shouting from tower to tower. Perhaps the way is to descend, from each language, down to the common base of human communication—the real but as yet undiscovered universal language—and then re-emerge by whatever particular route is convenient.¹¹

In this way, Weaver recasts the Tower of Babel story for an age of intelligent machines. His prose conjures forth a field of Tatlin towers, crowded together like telephone poles and resting on a hardwired open basement of basic communication.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Esthétique des arts plastiques* (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1964), 46–47. My translation from the French.

10. Warren Weaver, *Alice in Many Tongues: The Translation of Alice in Wonderland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

11. Weaver's 1949 memorandum is quoted in Steve Silberman, "Talking to Strangers," *Wired*, May 2000, 226.

But perhaps he could just as easily have availed himself of Green's cover image for this issue, which shows a man holding a wired can to his ear, as if getting his instant portable translation straight out of the can.

The impact of machine translation on the global politics of translation is clearly double-edged. Machine translation both strengthens the position of the master language of machine language (currently English) and, in theory at least, provides greater access to technological information for minority language speakers, potentially leveling the field. In his article on a "renewed international effort" to "smash language barriers and create a borderless global marketplace," *Wired's* Steve Silberman charts the rapid evolution from a time when it looked as if the Web would make translation obsolete because "it appeared that the Web was going to be the perfect high tech battering ram to cram Americanese down everybody's throat" to a time when everybody brings "their own dialects to the online potlatch":

Now here comes everybody, and they're bringing their own dialects to the online potlatch. An Israeli startup called Slangsoft is using Java to create onscreen keyboards that accept input in 42 languages, including those with non-Roman alphabets, such as Chinese, Korean, Hindi, Hebrew, and Sanskrit. . . . The blueprint for a new Tower of Babel is being sketched out in HTML. The widespread adoption of Unicode—a standard for encoding text that assigns a unique number to each letter, punctuation mark, and technical character in the world's major languages—is sparking an explosion of multilingual software.¹²

Spivak (in this issue) greets this kind of translation futurism with skepticism and suspicion, asserting that "restricted permeability" will continue to reign even with enhanced electronic communication and, worse, "that no one will ever translate into Fulani or Maya-Quiché without some particularly egregious agenda." Now even if we see Spivak's fears as fully justified in light of histories of corporate abuse of microminorities (think of Nigeria's Ogoni people at the hands of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group), machine translation ushers in the theoretical possibility of parity among linguistic nations (a parity that could never exist within global economies) by defaulting to a digital code that has no language. The code brings to the fore a different kind of translation problem—the blurring of alphabet and image in digital representation. This is comparable to the "talisman" in the novel of that title by Abdelwahab Meddeb analyzed in this issue by Dina Al-Kassim, which functions as a composite representation of Quranic phrases

12. Silberman, "Talking to Strangers," 226.

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and visual lexical cues. More important, for my argument here, as a code of codes it will be conceivably compatible at some future date with genetic coding. This is a potentially frightening scenario, conjuring up translation chips and visions of translation as a component of genetic engineering. Perhaps we can see intimations of translation's mutations in this direction in the work of Sarah Hudgins (in this issue). In *Multiplication of Sarah*, Hudgins experiments with a kind of translational cloning. The artist's first name is broken down into its component letters (a first order of depersonalization) and then "translated" into Morse code (a second order, since the minimalism of its code helps rout out the subjectivism associated with alphabetic writing). Finally, in a third order of depersonalization, the coded letters are printed by Xerox transfer, thus entering the subject into the regime of serial reproducibility. Hudgins's *Multiplication of Sarah* emerges as a new way of genetically altering the subject by turning it into living cipher, effectively transposing self into the scrip of genetic code: the translational equivalent of Dolly.

In answering to the old utopian dream of "beyond Babel" by producing translatability in digital form, machine translation thus revives utopian ambitions for global diplomacy. Not surprisingly, this futuristic idea already exists in experimental form as a device called, appropriately enough, Diplomat:

A handheld system for translating directions through a minefield. Diplomat is rapid-deployment speech-to-speech MT [machine translation] for the front lines in a world of volatile hot zones. . . . There was a particular language at the top of Darpa's [DARPA, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] agenda: Croatian and English. The system had to translate in both directions. It had to have a memory footprint small enough to be wedged into a portable device. And the interface had to be comprehensible by someone who had never seen a computer—a Bosnian farmer for instance.¹³

Though Silberman quotes a designer of Diplomat who says that the Army decided "it didn't want to field-test our device by trying to talk to guys with machine guns," Lockheed Martin will give Diplomat a second chance. "One possible configuration is a wireless client thin enough to fit into the pockets of combat fatigues, that has most of its code on a server."¹⁴

It remains to be seen whether diplomacy or war is fostered when translatability

13. Silberman, "Talking to Strangers," 233.

14. Silberman, "Talking to Strangers," 288.

is this fluid and this detached from a nation-space or community of speakers. Perhaps this “wireless client” will be connected to a space as deforested, razed, and denationalized as a war zone. Here we are anticipating the condition of translation’s complete absorption in information, or the state it would find itself in when it is fully dematerialized by information technology.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has speculated that greater global access to technological literacy is already having an interesting impact on the future of translation, as poorer nations find themselves in a better position to pick and choose from what is culturally on offer in the global souk.¹⁵ Western humanism and its correlatives, universal standards of legal and social justice, may not fare so well in a full-service transnational market. It is difficult to predict whether humanism—as the stronghold of Western culture—will continue to export well. Chakrabarty raises important questions about the future of global consensus and a common culture in an era of greater technical ease of translatability. For someone like Sigmund Freud (writing in 1915, some six months after the start of World War I), the loss of such a culture made the world ripe for war. In a section of “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” entitled “The Disillusionment of War,” Freud would stake the prospects for international peace on “the unity among the civilized peoples”—peoples, that is, who can feel at home in other nations and in other languages because of a common culture.¹⁶

Freud’s view is echoed today in a liberal humanist agenda that sees improved conditions of translatability as an essentially good thing that bolsters Kantian cosmopolitical dreams of “perpetual peace,” unborders zones of cultural production, and curtails parochialism and paranoia within and across nations.¹⁷ But as many essays in this issue demonstrate, there are also adverse effects that may arise when translation becomes too much of a good thing: the *imperium* of monolingualism, a state of Malthusian survivalism in which small languages succumb to big ones; an increasingly market-driven situation in the global culture industry that rewards translation-friendly works of art; and, most disconcertingly perhaps,

15. Dipesh Chakrabarty, conversation with author, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University, Canberra, June 2000.

16. Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” *Sigmund Freud: The Standard Edition*, vol. 14, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis [1957] 1995), 277. Originally published as “Zeitgemässe über Krieg und Tod” (1915).

17. Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck, trans. Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, and Emil L. Fackenheim (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Macmillan, [1795] 1963).

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the shrinkage of vernacular flavor or ideational and emotional complexity that would result if and when the language of machine translation, with its premium on reductive vocabulary and basic communication, becomes a model for artistic expression.

Emily Apter teaches in the departments of French and comparative literature at the University of California at Los Angeles, where she is also chair of comparative literature. Her most recent books are *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (1999) and *The Translation Zone: Language Politics at the Millennial Pass* (forthcoming).